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M: This is an interview with Senator Gary Hart, I'm in the history offices at CSU, the date is October 28, 1976, it's about 1:45 in the afternoon, and my name is David McComb.

And we're talking basically about the Big Thompson and your role in it. So let's start off at the beginning. When did you first hear about the Big Thompson flood?

H: I heard about it, precisely at noon, August 1, at the State Capitol. Starting backwards, I went, I had planned to go on one of the climbs on the morning of Colorado Day, the Centennial Day. All the 14,000-foot peaks were being climbed, and so I'd been invited to join a group climbing Mount Sherman.

I woke about 3:00 a.m., was picked up at 4:00 a.m. by a staff member at my office, and driven to the base of Mount Sherman, where the group collected at about 7:30 that morning. We started up the mountain at twenty of eight, about 12 or 14 of us, and got to the summit almost exactly at eight a.m. Then there was some celebration and so forth.

Then everyone started down on his or her own, and we started back for Denver, I guess, about nine or nine-thirty, nine-thirty, and drove straight to the State Capitol where there was a Centennial celebration going on.

I believe the ceremony had started at either eleven or eleven-thirty, because it was well underway, and the Governor was speaking when I got there. I was not well-dressed, so I didn't make any effort to go up to the platform, stayed in the back of the crowd.

And just as I arrived, this staff member of mine came up and sort of briefed me on what was going on there, then said that the mood had been dampened by a disaster that had occurred the night before, and said that
it was in the Big Thompson Canyon below Estes Park, and that, I believe the figure, six or eight people had been killed in a flood, that the Governor had announced that at the celebration, and in fact I think he had been scheduled to do some other event that day. He called that off, maybe a climb or something. Then finally, we had as part of our agenda that day, a trip up to this area for a picnic, I believe, in Fort Collins. And that was, of course, cancelled.

The meeting at the Capitol ended, and then we returned to my office, probably about twelve-thirty, and some staff members had been in the office all morning collecting information on this, and they briefed me further as the magnitude of the disaster began to become apparent at that time. That it was substantial, that there were substantial loss of lives and destruction of property. So we undertook a series of activities at that time, that afternoon.

M: Okay. I need to ask you about those activities, that is your reaction to this. You actually did come up here, didn't you?

H: Yes, I flew up. What we did, I remember all of this very clearly, I sat down at a desk, drafted a wire to the President, asking for immediate declaration of the area as a flood disaster--I don't have a copy of that; we could make it available, but I believe I said that the deaths would run into the dozens, is the language that I used, and we didn't, of course, have any idea. Nobody knew at that time.

The second thing, I had a staff member who was in touch with the Civil Air Patrol, which had been flying the area, and I asked for a report on their visual sightings of the situation. There was no ground transportation into the area, and so any knowledge anyone had was from air transportation, either fixed-wing or helicopter. And I think the most accurate data had
come from a couple of helicopter landings where survivors were removed, they were beginning that operation then, and the second thing I did was ask whether I could get a flight up here, and the staff began to work on that.

I was scheduled to catch a plane back to Washington, so there was a time constraint, and that was a legislative period where there were going to be votes the next day, and very important ones, so I had to be back.

The third thing I did was to inquire whether there were sufficient rescue aircraft available, helicopters particularly. And put in an inquiry into Ft. Carson and surrounding military bases to determine whether other aircraft were available, if they were needed. At that time no one knew how many people had to be gotten out, and therefore they didn't know how many helicopters they were going to need. I think then we got some press statement out to the effect that we were asking for Presidential declaration of disaster.

M: Yes, that was sent off by what, telegram?
H: That was sent off by telegram about one, no later than one or one-thirty that day, one o'clock, I think.
M: Yes, so this would, then support, what the Governor was doing, too.
H: Well, at that time, I had no idea what anyone else was doing.
M: I see.
H: I hadn't had a chance to talk to Dick. He was speaking when I got to the Capitol, and so he was surrounded by people. I didn't know what his plans were. And I had no contact with any other members of the Congressional delegation, and so that was--my actions there were pretty unilateral.
M: Yes. Just to follow up a little bit, did President Ford respond to that?
H: He responded within, I think, 48 hours. It became apparent, well, to jump
a little bit, I met, ended that meeting, Congressman Johnson at the Airport. We were taking the same flight back, as it turns out, he had done almost exactly the same thing I had done. He had called the White House and then sent a wire and had taken a flight of his own at almost the same time I was.

So it turns out we were both had contacted the White House, and I think the Governor may have also the next day, and the President, I don't remember the exact time sequence, but the President made the declaration either late Monday or some time Tuesday, I believe, early that week.

M: Just out of curiosity. Did the President ever contact you back?
H: No.
M: He just went ahead and acted, that was it.
H: Yes. I think he did contact Congressman Johnson, but we may have put a call into the White House, but I don't think there was any call from the other direction.
M: There was no need to. Okay, and then you came up here, and you did fly over the Canyon?
H: Yes, I went out to the Jefferson County Airport, which is where the Civil Air Patrol plane was, I guess at about 1:30 or 2:00, we were in the air by two, certainly, and I was over this area by 2:15 or 2:30. We flew up the Poudre Canyon, I believe it's called, and ran into some heavy weather, some overcast and some rain.

The pilot then went back out of the canyon, and we came up from the east, southeast, into the Big Thompson Canyon, and we went east to west and then back down again. I think we flew it two or three times. And usually, I think at an altitude of five to seven hundred feet, something like that. It was a pretty good view.
M: Yes, I was just going to ask you how well you could see.

H: You could see pretty well. You could see people down there; you could see clusters of people. And my two strongest impressions were (one) the tremendous damage had been done to the road, but (two) what I could not see was the damage to buildings, and you could see buildings shifted on their foundations. What you did not see was a lot of debris or parts of houses or porches or big pieces of stuff in the creek. Limbs and things, but you didn't appreciate the magnitude of the damage to the buildings, because I remember distinctly you couldn't see them sort of washed into the middle of the creek or anything. I gather from the ground, that that was a lot more obvious, a lot more apparent.

M: Right. Okay, while you were up here, then, after your flight and so forth, did you have any contact with the local people, sheriff?

H: No.

M: County commissioners.

H: No. The Civil Air Patrol told me that there was such chaos on the ground and so, such confusion of effort to try to get coordinated that the Highway Patrol, the Civil Air Patrol, the Army, the State disaster relief people, that they were just then beginning to talk to each other, and I think I made some inquiry as to whether there was any chance to get hold of anybody, any authority. And they said, "No, it's just..." because they were, they were listening to a lot of it on the plane communications system, and it was evident nobody was really in charge at that point.

M: Yes. And okay, let me ask you about your feelings about this. You had to be back to Washington for those votes, so you're going to have to leave. What did you think? Was it, well, "It's the sheriff's baby, and if he needs anything, he'll let me know," or...?
H: Well, but there were a lot of agencies, the Army was involved by this time. Fort Carson had sent some helicopters.

M: So really, not a hell of a lot you can do there.

H: Well, there wasn't, I set up a list of staff instructions as to contacts to make and information and then I wanted a report that night at home, and I wanted a report the next morning, and we sort of began to organize.

The fourth instruction I gave when I got back to our office immediately after leaving the State House, before coming up here was that, our van should be up here, our mobile office should be up here, set up first thing Monday morning. In fact, should start out that night.

Inquiries then, by the time I got back, were to the effect that it was awfully hard even to get close. Because roads were blocked off, and they were discouraging people from coming in and so forth and so on.

M: The advantage of the mobile van would have been what?

H: Whatever advantage it would have been for me to sit down there. You know, just to be available. And there was nothing we were--we had no equipment to do anything; we couldn't, we had no blankets, shoes, I mean, the senatorial office is not a good disaster fleet, operation.

But the point is that we could begin to process claims; you know, we could begin to tell people what funds were available. So I had people here in Denver and in Washington researching federal grant programs, relief programs, what disaster relief included. We were researching the law, had people in Washington looking at the law Sunday night, so that when the van did get close, people would start walking in and saying, "I've lost everything. What can I do?" we can say, "Well, here's step one, here's step two, here's step three." Processing.

M: So you got all that information gathered then.

H: Yes, and then for the next twenty-four hours.
M: Did the van finally come up?
H: Yes, it came up, I don't know exactly when, but Monday or Tuesday, that and then began to plug into local efforts and other rescue efforts and so on.
M: So it becomes a sort of a point to distribute information.
H: Yes, and take, and process information as well.
M: Okay, I assume then that you fly back to Washington.
H: Well, as it turned out, we didn't. Five members of Congress and myself got stranded up in Denver airport by a successor storm, which delayed our flight hour after hour after hour. We finally didn't take off until midnight. Ended up spending eight hours at the Denver airport, waiting, United Airlines constantly saying, "There's going to be a flight in half an hour," and then there never was.
M: You got in what, Sunday?
H: Sunday night. So I got there at five-thirty or six, Monday morning.
M: Okay, and then you're back in Washington, what, the next three or four weeks?
H: No, I think a week or two. I don't remember when exactly the next trip out was.
M: Okay. Did you then feel a need or necessity or anything to come back to the Big Thompson? Or were things pretty well working? Were you satisfied that you knew what was going on, or what?
H: What did become apparent was that what we could do, with the task force set up, interagency task force with the declaration of the disaster, with the beginning of the federal presence here, what it did appear we could do best and while I was in Washington, and that was to facilitate money and operations back there. And another politician walking around demonstrating concern wouldn't help anybody. But I think pursuing the SBA Small Business
Administrating matters, pursuing the food stamp matter, pursuing the LEAA [Law Enforcement Assistance Administration] matters, and clearing logjams in Washington seemed to be a lot more profitable than looking grieved.

M: Okay.

H: Plus we had a substantial--I think we had, at one point we had six staff members up here or something like that.

M: Okay. Is there a substantial staff work, then, in pursuing these things at the LEAA and the food stamps?

H: Most of the Washington staff. The Denver staff was working with the victims.

M: Yes, right, but back there in Washington?

H: Back there, the staff. Yes.

M: Yes, there was a problem getting some of the food stamps released, apparently.

H: And we processed it up through Agriculture, found out that it was backlogged in the Undersecretary, or Assistant Secretary's office, who had ruled that food stamps were not available to disaster victims, and so then I called Earl Butz.

M: Yes. So you had to get that released, huh?

H: Yes. And that worked. I think within twelve hours that issue turned around.

M: Okay, the story I've heard about that is that there were difficulty with food stamps because of the Rapid City flood, and they found either some fraud or some people getting stamps that didn't deserve it or something like that. Is that correct.

H: As far as I know, that's the story the staff got from their contacts with Agriculture officials. A great reluctance to move on this matter, and the grounds were always Rapid City.
M: Yes.
H: And malingerers and fraud, and so forth.
M: Okay. I would assume you're going to get some of that probably in any operation.
H: Sure.
M: You may mean that meanwhile 90 percent are...?
H: That's right. It seemed to me a rather callous and cold bureaucratic opinion, that if you've got two or three bad apples, you know, you let the barrel go to hell.
M: Yes. Yes, well that was released in fairly short order, then.
H: Yes, it was. I think it was, as I say, within twelve hours after our conversation with the Secretary.
M: Yes. That's kind of curious, isn't it? If you hadn't been back there working on it, it might have been even longer.
H: Well, I don't know. You know, what you don't know is if you don't get to the man on top, how long it would take those to turn around, if they would ever. But I'm not about to say because I was there, and beating on doors in Washington that, that solely did it. You could have made the same call from here. But I think it helps to have a senator from a state.
M: How about the legal agencies? LEAA?
H: That was, I believe, a little more complex in that there was little precedent, either way, and the LEAA people really didn't know what their authority was. And there was a lot of bureaucratic shucking and jiving about that. But eventually they came around I think to the tune of $150,000 or something like that.
M: Yes, to the County, that's all. Much of that is to the sheriff's office.
H: Yes. That took a little longer, but I don't remember exactly the time frame.
M: A month or so.
H: A couple of weeks at least, or to a month, yes.
M: And that included some equipment and a moving van and things like that.
H: Yes.
M: Okay, in Washington, what do you do in that case? Does your staff go out and talk to people, do you try to clear up...?
H: Well, you get on the phone; half the problem is finding the person in charge. Working your way through the bureaucracy. I think you get a lot of buck passing. Legitimate and illegitimate, I mean people just say, "You've got the wrong person, you got to talk to X." So you track down the person to whom you have to talk, he may be in a conference in Miami, or, you know, whatever.

But it's not quite as easy as just picking up the phone and making one call. That takes a half a day or a day or a week or three days or whatever.

Then you get this business, well, applications have to be filed, you say, "Wait a minute. You've got people out there doing twenty-four duty, and you know, and the County doesn't have any money, and we can't wait six months for an application to be filed; we want to know, can you do it, or can't you?" We'll have to ask our lawyers," or whomever. Then they don't get back to you for three days and you call them again, and you go through a lot of that kind of foot dragging, but finally it came around.

M: Yes. Did you have any flak, or did you catch any criticism, or commentary about this five thousand dollar limit to, for individual aid?

H: Oh, yes, yes. There are two sets of problems, really, with the government, where Federal government is involved. One were the so-called emergency problems. "Where am I going to sleep?" "What am I going to put on?" "What am I
going to eat?"

And my feeling is, based on what my own staff has told me, is that the disaster relief officials, the experts here, do pretty well at that. That when they moved in, as they did within 24 hours, set up shop, coordinated all the efforts, that they did a very good job and I'd be interested if that's confirmed by others, but then the second set of problems are: "Now I'm fed." "Now I'm clothed." "Now I've got a place over my head." "What happens to me now?" "Can I build my house back?" The long-term, future problems.

Then you begin to find out that there's no reduced SBA interest, that there's no real government policy to make victims of the catastrophes whole again, dollar for dollar, that whatever valuations and compensations are post-catastrophe rather than pre-catastrophe, and that the whole structure is set up that way. That's when we began to look at the possibility of an amendment on the floor of the Senate or through the committee on the SBA question.

M: Okay, let me ask your feelings about that. Is it necessary? Even though there's an attitude that, well, if a guy has survived, and you go through the emergency parts anyway, and if he has any kind of ambition and maybe $2,500 dollars in his pocket or something like that, he can get going again. And that the guy ought to be encouraged to be somewhat independent, enter the work force or something, rebuild at least in part on his own, rather than a dollar for dollar restoration. Do you have any feelings about this?

H: What might be called the "act of God" theory of history?

M: Yes, Yes.

H: That's the way it happened on the plains or the frontier, or something, so
if you get wiped out, you get wiped out. The government's not going to come...

Well, I find it a little bit ironic. Well, I would come down on the other side probably, you know, part of the role of government. It almost gets you down to basic political philosophy, frankly, what the role of government is, and being of the party [Democratic Party] that I am, and roughly the ideological persuasion, I tend to intuitively come down on the side that the government has a big role here, against what you might call the "Act of God" types.

I must say, as a politician with no apologies for the title, I think elected officials have responsibility in this area to their constituents not to be Olympian and not to say, "Yes, you deserve it. No, you don't." But there your role becomes what again, traditionally has been often called "pork barrel." Any other senator in this country who has a disaster in his state is going to do everything he can for his people, and I'd better too. I wasn't elected God; you know, I was elected to do what I can, and what I'm going to try to do is get you know, as much money for those people as I can.

Frankly, that's been my attitude about it all along. So, and not to question what the policy of the government ought to be, but to try to set that policy for the people of Colorado. That's one of the hats that a legislator wears. But stepping back, let's say, from a academic, philosophical point of view, I do find it, it is in this case a lot more crystalline, but part of a web, which is part of a present-day mentality, and that is to say, "the government's too big; it spends too much money; it takes too much of my taxes; it's involved in my life; it's regulating
me too much," and then "I want some help to get something from the federal
government." There is a schizophrenia, if not hypocrisy. And, of course
a person who's wiped out, has lost perhaps his only shelter and livelihood
and furniture and mementoes and ....

M: Or maybe retired or something.

H: Maybe retired. Isn't going to sit around and philosophize about how, with
the size in government, that's when they want the government to work. So
you can't go to the people and say, "Look, Charlie, just the other day you
wrote me a letter saying the government was too big."

It's not the time to do that, but nevertheless, I find it rather
ironic that the people who are often quite outspoken about their indepen­
dence and their distrust and dislike for the federal government are, under
circumstances like that, certainly, and even much less, often very inclined
to turn to the federal government for help.

M: Did this disaster affect your workload in Washington to any great extent?

H: Me personally, or the staff, or both?

M: Both.

H: Well, I can't say that it substantially affected mine. There were the phone
calls; there were the staff briefings; there were the conferences, a lot of
odds and ends, but I couldn't accumulate that into any time bloc and tell
you that it was a 25 percent work increase or anything like that.

It was just part of the day. And it ruled itself in. There were not
big blocs of time. There were just random bits and pieces, but that's
generally what a day is like, anyway. I would say it substantially increased
the staff load, particularly here in the state.

M: Yes, your state office.
M: Okay, kind of one sort of last type of question. Did this disaster make any difference as to the political area? That is, did it change your operation any? Did you have to hire new people? Did it change your attitude toward legislation? Did it make any difference, for example, with your relationship to Colorado? Did it give you any ideas about future legislation? Land use or something like that: The basic question is, did the disaster have any impact?

H: On the political process?

M: Yes, right.

H: It's too early to say, I think. We are still working. If it does, I would say it would be in that area of the role of the government in a long-term rehabilitation of disaster areas. Thinking back through what the policy of the government ought to be, it's too early to say how we're going to come out on that. Whether I will introduce legislation to cover future Big Thompsons. It's not out of the question.

Maybe an amendment to present law which says that victims of what the President determines to be legitimate disasters, if you will, or major disasters, can qualify for 100 percent compensation. Something like that. Neither of those is out of the question. But I can't say in the short term that it really has changed my outlook on my job or structure of my office or anything like that.

M: Okay. Open-end question, anything else you think we ought to add to this? Have we covered all the bases, something in my ignorance that I didn't bring up?

H: I think those are the major... again, we have participated with the so-
called Governor's Task Force, on steps to be taken, and with the local officials. It might be an interesting case study for the future of the relationship between the state government and local government or local government and state and federal government on what ought to be done.

You get into the whole question of compensation, of restoration, of ownership, of flood plains, of recreation areas, and I did receive a number of very thoughtful letters, two or three particularly, from local people, who urged that every effort be made to prevent people from going back into the Canyon, that it be turned into a recreational area, and that no domestic inhabitation should occur.

M: Isn't it interesting that the disaster becomes kind of a political question?

H: Oh, yes, yes, very much so. Yes, after you get past the human suffering, then it begins to be pulling and hauling of interests.

M: Okay. Anything else?

H: No.

M: Thank you very much.
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